



A Bigger Boom Box

The Supreme Court gives corporations vast new powers to influence elections

DECADES OF EFFORTS TO REFORM U.S. POLITICS by limiting infusions of corporate cash were sent to the landfill in January by the U.S. Supreme Court. The court's 5-4 decision in *Citizens United v. FEC* freed corporations to spend as much as they want advocating for or against candidates in the crucial closing days of federal elections. The ruling's breadth seemed to spell the end of similar prohibitions on the state and local levels.

How bad will it be for environmental concerns?

"Really bad," says Robert Weissman, president of Public Citizen. "The Supreme Court has just invited Exxon and Chevron and International Paper to spend unlimited amounts of money to affect election outcomes, and there's every reason to believe that they'll accept the invitation."

"It sucks," says Gene Karpinski, president of the League of Conservation Voters. He notes that last year Exxon spent \$800,000 to influence elections but \$45 million on lobbying. "They can now spend that much directly on elections."

But will they? "The big question is whether they are actually going to use this new tool that has been given to them," says Dave Levinthal, communications director of the

Center for Responsive Politics. Corporations already often give to candidates on both sides of the aisle. If they choose sides, he points out, they'd better be sure they pick the winner. And businesses might be leery of aligning with a particular political party, since presumably they'd still welcome customers from both.

One proposed response to the high court's turnaround would require CEOs to personally vouch for their campaign commercials (e.g., "I'm Warren Buffett and I approve this ad"). But corporations could still form front organizations or simply channel their money through existing associations like the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

Other possible fixes range from relatively easy—an executive order forbidding the government to contract with businesses making campaign expenditures—to dauntingly difficult, like the proposed constitutional amendment to deny for-profit corporations free speech rights. Public financing of elections would also do the trick, Public Citizen's Weissman points out. As to whether a remedy is really necessary, Levinthal notes that it's still early in the 2010 election cycle. "We'll know soon enough," he says. —Paul Rafter

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